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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000687

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP AND DRL/PHD

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT ARRESTS - A POSSIBLE RESOLUTION IN SIGHT?

REF: A. STATE 103009

[B](#). MANAMA 638

[C](#). MANAMA 237

Classified By: CDA Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.5(b)(d).

1.(C) SUMMARY: The government will release the 14 detainees arrested for gathering petition signatures if the opposition agrees to drop its illegal petition drive. According to Bahraini law, a corporate entity may only submit to government a petition signed by the entity's members. The government arrested the petitioners because of allegations they were coercing citizens to sign the petition. The detainees are maintaining their hunger strike and small demonstrations are being held on their behalf. One detainee was taken to hospital. The government and the hardline opposition are engaged in a dialogue through many intermediaries. They appear to be close to a political agreement that could win the detainees' release and mark the hard line opposition's formal acceptance of the 2002 constitution as the law of the land. That could mark the beginning of full participation in Bahrain's democratic reform experiment, increasing significantly its prospects for success. END SUMMARY.

2.(C) The government arrested petition gatherers because they were coercing people who refused to sign the petition with threats of shunning, Foreign Ministry Assistant Undersecretary for Cooperation and Follow up Shaikh Abd al-Aziz bin Mubarak Al-Khalifa told POL/ECON Chief on May 9. Shura Council member and human rights activist Faisal Fuladh verified to POL/ECON Chief and POLOFF on May 10 that citizens had complained to him and other National Assembly members about intimidation, and several press reports on coercion have been published. (COMMENT: The opposition societies used similar coercion tactics to enforce their boycott of the October 2002. END COMMENT)

3.(C) Royal advisor Hassan Fakhro and Shaikh Abd al-Aziz told us separately that Bahraini law forbids general petition drives; a society may only submit to government a petition signed by the society's members. Fakhro said the government arrested the signature gatherers specifically because they violated this law. Minister of Industry and royal confidante Hassan Fakhro told Charge on May 11 that the Attorney General would drop the charges and release the 15 Bahrainis now in custody if the four hardline opposition political societies agreed in writing to drop their illegal petition drive and submit their constitutional amendment requests to the parliament.

4.(C) Fakhro told Charge that numerous intermediaries, including members of parliament and prominent journalists, were facilitating a dialogue between the hardline societies and the government. Face-to-face meetings have also occurred. According to Fakhro, the King received pre-eminent Shia religious scholars Shaikh Isa Qasim and Sayyid Abdulla al-Ghurayfi to help "clear the air." Fakhro added that the King has also offered a meeting with the leaders of the four societies if they will drop the petition drive. Fakhro said that al-Wifaq's leaders are unwilling to sign an agreement to drop the petition drive to obtain the release of the detainees, all of whom are al-Wifaq members.

5.(C) Our local NDI rep advised on May 11 that although he did not insert himself into the process, both the government and the opposition had approached him for advice and to act as an informal intermediary. He said that opposition leaders had refused the initial government demand to sign before the Attorney General a letter stating that they would "abide by the law of the land." Our contact said that the Minister of the Royal Court accepted the NDI rep's compromise proposal that opposition leaders and prominent political figures in society who have been trying to defuse the crisis would sign such a letter before the King. The NDI rep noted that this would put the leaders of the hard line opposition societies on record as accepting the constitution as the "law of the land."

6.(C) According to its president, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) has been facilitating small family member demonstrations at the Justice Ministry and other public

locations (police station, Seef Mall). He verified that an attempt to demonstrate in front of the Prime Minister's office was prevented by police and the demonstration organizer arrested. Hassan Fakhro told Charge on May 11 that the organizer was released from jail on May 10. The BCHR president confirmed that the arrested petitioners remain, as of May 11, on a hunger strike. One was taken to hospital on May 9 after he collapsed.

7.(C) COMMENT: As with February's constitutional seminar imbroglio, the government is not handling this situation deftly. Shura Council member Faisal Fuladh belittled the government approach, arguing it should have just let the societies gather signatures and submit their petition. The government could file it "appropriately" afterward, he noted. To us, government signals to the hardline opposition are inconsistent. The King accepted last fall a 35,000 signature petition collected by the National Committee for the Victims of Torture. Most of the singatories were not members of the society. The government has arrested violent demonstrators, but released them with no charge or trial. They arrested petition gatherers and charged them with sedition. The mixed signals have confused the opposition; al-Wifaq Human Rights Committee Chairman Adel Abbassi disclaimed to POLOFF "we don't know how to dance with the government anymore."

8.(C) Despite the confusion, which could very well be attributed to Bahrain's inexperience with democracy, the government and opposition appear close to reaching a compromise that would win the detainees' release. That compromise may also include the opposition's formal acceptance of the 2002 constitution as the law of the land. Such a political agreement could prove to be the beginning of full participation in Bahrain's democratic reform experiment, increasing its probability of success. END COMMENT.
FORD